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COSPLAYERS don the avatars of their favourite characters.—Tahir Jamal/White Star

Geeks from all generations bond over pop culture

By Sarah B. Haider in Karachi

FOOTPRINTS

ALTHOUGH Karachi is known for its vibrant energy, the sudden winter chill over the weekend made even routine outings a challenge.

But the wind chill barely had any impact on young crowds thronging to the Arts Council, where 'Geek Con' was in full swing — a veritable gala of cosplay, gaming, anime, fan art and live performances.

The two-day event was more than a celebration of pop culture — it was a space where generations met, mingled, and, in a rare and effortless manner, blended.

"This is the one place where the whole generational gap kind of dissolves," a 35-year-old cosplayer said. Dressed as Luisa Madrigal from Disney's *Encanto*, she said she spent a month gathering materials and a week putting her costume together.

"If you love anime, manga or comics, you belong here. No one gives you looks. People are welcoming. This is the place where you [can be yourself]."

The event saw children in colourful costumes moving among stalls selling anime-inspired merchandise, acrylic swords, jewellery and accessories.

Young adults could be seen clustered around gaming screens, joysticks in hand. Others were found fully immersed in role-playing board games, or browsing through manga and comic collections.

Subculture

At its core, Geek Con is a celebration of fandom and imagination, a subculture that has grown from a niche to something far more visible over the years, according to organiser Yasir Obaid.

The event was bigger and livelier than in previous years. "The crowd has grown so much that navigating the venue was almost a challenge. Certainly a good problem to have," Obaid, 27, noted with a chuckle.

Visitors enjoyed a mix of performances, from a vintage Linkin Park set reimagined with anime music videos, to a high-energy, anime-themed dance routine by local performers Anarchy.

There were karaoke sessions that let fans belt out their favourite anime and pop songs, while interactive games and Harry Potter-style challenges kept participants engaged.

A separate area was set up for gaming enthusiasts, where *Tekken 8* tournaments and Pakistan Pro League sessions were held, with players and spectators cheering and groaning at every move.

Why fans keep coming back

Thirty-five-year-old Ayesha Amir, who was visiting from Sydney with her sister, said she initially came to the event reluctantly, but was pleasantly surprised.

"I've been a fan of anime and manga since I was 12, but I'd never been to one of these events here," she said, seated quietly in a corner, smiling as children passed by in handmade costumes. "The passion here is very real. People are open about what they love. It's getting people out of their houses in a positive environment."

Speaking about what drew her to anime, she said it had always been about escapism. "When you watch it, you forget all your worries. It calms you down."

Another participant, a 50-year-old woman, had come with her son. "You have to be young at heart to watch anime," she said, adding that "age is not a limit at all".

She pointed out that in many countries, fans in their 70s also attend conventions, and it was completely acceptable. "Anime is emotional. When I watch it, I forget all my worries."

Creativity takes centre stage

For teenagers like 16-year-old Ayzel Asif, who came to participate in the cosplay walk as Hornet from the game *Silksong*, blending into the multigenerational crowd was effortless.

Other participants spoke about the freedom the event offered from being judged. Aiman Raza, 29, who cosplayed as Velma from *Scooby-Doo*, said, "People think it's just cartoons. But anime isn't for kids. This is where you can be free from stereotypes and just enjoy yourself."

Mohid Ali Khan, 25, who chose to cosplay as a character from *Metal Gear Solid 3*, said the costume was a nod to his childhood and the generational shift in pop culture tastes. "It's not really about a niche community," he explained.

"It's more about the generational gap. Our elders grew up with old actors and singers, then we moved on to comics, and now Gen Z is into anime and video games. It just keeps evolving."

He made his costume largely by hand, including parts fashioned from his mother's old leather purse. "I just bought the fabric and built the rest myself. It took me a day," he said.

Eshal Hasan, 22, who came to the event cosplaying as popular anime character Frieren, stole the show with a costume that combined creativity and technical flair.

She even carried a staff fitted with a 3D hologram fan, which projected moving, glowing images that simulated magical effects. Fans couldn't resist taking pictures with her.

The cosplayers weren't deterred by the winter chill. When asked about the cold weather, Shahzain Aslam, 27, shirtless and barefoot as he cosplayed Akaza from *Demon Slayer*, shrugged and said, "You've got to do what you've got to do." Mustafa Afridi, 36, dressed as Vander from *Arcane*, described the event as a way of keeping "the inner child alive".

A detailed version of this article can be accessed on Dawn.com

Israeli troops kill two more Palestinians in Gaza

- Israeli soldier being investigated for faking Palestinian's abduction for ransom
- US envoy Steve Witkoff calls talks with Netanyahu 'positive'

CAIRO: In another violation of the US-brokered ceasefire, Israeli troops killed two more Palestinians in the Tuffah neighbourhood in the northern Gaza Strip on Sunday, and an Israeli drone wounded four others in a separate incident in Gaza City, local health authorities said. On Saturday, Israeli forces killed three Palestinians, two of them teenagers, in two drone attacks in Gaza.

Medical workers said an Israeli drone exploded on the rooftop of a multi-floor building in Gaza City, wounding four Palestinians in the street nearby.

There was no comment by the Israeli military on either incident.

Gaza has been reduced to rubble in the indiscriminate Israeli bombing.

The Gaza health ministry says more than 71,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed by Israeli fire since then.

It says that at least 480 people were killed by Israeli fire since the ceasefire agreement came into effect last October.

Earlier this month, Washington announced that the plan had now moved into the second phase, under which Israel is expected to withdraw troops further from Gaza, and Hamas is due to yield control of the territory's administration.

Meanwhile, in Khan Younis, over a hundred people attended the funeral of a person who was killed by Israeli drone attack on Saturday, after holding special prayers in front of his white-shrouded body at the morgue in Nasser Hospital.

"They are liars, there is no ceasefire," said Fares Erheimat, a relative of the dead man, during the funeral.

Ransom case

Israeli military said on Sunday it had launched an investigation into a soldier who reportedly fabricated a kidnapping of a Palestinian detainee and demanded ransom from his family.

The Palestinian man had been detained at a holding facility when a military police guard photographed him and sent the image to his family, falsely claiming he had been kidnapped, the *Times of Israel* reported.

In a separate report, Israeli Army Radio said the soldier demanded the family transfer money in exchange for his release.

Confirming the case, the military said an investigation had been launched but declined to provide details.

US envoys, Netanyahu discuss Rafah

US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to reopen the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt during talks in Jerusalem, Israeli media reported Sunday.

The reports came after a newly appointed administrator for Gaza said on Thursday that the crossing would be operational in both directions next week.

Israeli news site *Ynet* reported, citing an unnamed Israeli official, that while the meeting between Netanyahu, Witkoff and Kushner was "positive", Witkoff pressed Israel to reopen Rafah even before Hamas returns remains of the last Israeli prisoner believed to be held in Gaza.

According to the official, Witkoff also raised the possibility of Turkiye playing a role in Gaza's future.

"Witkoff pushed to bring our greatest rival, Turkiye, to our border," the official was quoted as saying.

The official also accused Witkoff of acting on behalf of Doha, saying he had "become a lobbyist for Qatari interests", according to Ynet.

US officials' discussions with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the second phase of President Donald Trump's 20-point peace plan for Gaza were constructive, Special Envoy Steve Witkoff said on Sunday.

"The United States and Israel maintain a strong and longstanding relationship built on close coordination and shared priorities. The discussion was constructive and positive, with both sides aligned on next steps and the importance of continued cooperation on all matters critical to the region," Witkoff said in an X post. The talks were held on Saturday, he said.—Agencies

Nurse's killing by ICE sparks outrage

MINNEAPOLIS: The fatal shooting of a US citizen by federal immigration agents Saturday has triggered a wave of criticism from local leaders to Hollywood stars, with conflicting accounts raising questions about the incident.

Federal agents shot Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old intensive care nurse, less than three weeks after an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer killed Renee Good, also 37.

While the Department of Homeland Security said Pretti carried a pistol and ammunition, cellphone footage has challenged the government's description.

Minnesota Gov Tim Walz called the shooting "horrific" and demanded state authorities take charge.

"The federal government cannot be trusted to lead this investigation. The state will handle it, period," Walz told a news conference.

Pretti's parents described him as a "kindhearted soul" and disputed the official narrative.

"The sickening lies told about our son by the administration are reprehensible and disgusting," they said in a statement. "Alex is clearly not holding a gun when attacked."

Dimitri Drekonja, a colleague at the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs hospital, said Pretti was a nurse working "to support critically ill Veterans."

A FEDERAL agent lobs a tear gas canister towards protesters during the clashes following the second fatal shooting in Minneapolis.—AFP

Political fallout spread to Washington, with Sen Bill Cassidy, a Republican, writing on X that the credibility of ICE and DHS is at stake.

"There must be a full joint federal and state investigation," Cassidy wrote. "We can trust the American people with the truth."

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey urged President Donald Trump to end the immigration operation.

"This is a moment to act like a leader," Frey said. "Put Minneapolis, put America first in this moment — let's achieve peace."

The incident also drew condemnation at the Sundance Film Festival.

Olivia Wilde said the shooting was "unfathomable." "I can't believe that we're watching people get murdered in the street," she told *AFP* at "The Invite" premiere.

"These brave Americans who have stepped out to protest the injustice of these ICE quote/unquote 'officers,' and watching them be murdered — it's unfathomable. We cannot normalise it." Natalie Portman became emotional as she described her feelings about a "horrible day".

"What is happening in our country is just obscene," she told *AFP*.

Gun rights advocates voiced concern over the administration linking Pretti's legal gun possession to an intent to harm. After a federal prosecutor suggested shooting armed protesters is often justified, the National Rifle Association called the sentiment "dangerous and wrong".

The Gun Owners of America added, "The Second Amendment protects Americans' right to bear arms while protesting — a right the federal government must not infringe upon."

Barack and Michelle Obama on Sunday forcefully condemned the killing of Pretti, saying in a joint statement it should be a "wake-up call" that core US values "are increasingly under assault."

The former president and first lady blasted Trump and his government as seeming "eager to escalate the situation," demanding they work with Walz and other local officials.—AFP

US to inject $1.6bn into rare earths miner for 10pc stake, *Financial Times* reports

NEW YORK: The United States is planning to inject $1.6 billion into Oklahoma-based miner USA Rare Earth and will receive a 10 per cent stake in the company, the *Financial Times* reported on Saturday, citing people familiar with the matter

The government investment and a separate $1 billion private financing deal are slated to be announced on Monday, the report said.

The White House and USA Rare Earth did not immediately respond to *Reuters*' request for comment.

The government would receive 16.1 million shares in the rare earths company, along with warrants for a further 17.6m, both priced at $17.17, the report said.

Washington said in December last year it was planning more "historic deals" with the US mining sector to increase domestic production of lithium, rare earths and other minerals used for national defence and rely less on China, which has used its minerals prowess as leverage in trade negotiations.

Last year, the administration took equity stakes in MP Materials, Lithium Americas and Trilogy Metals.

The deal with USA Rare Earth was "focused on onshoring critical and strategic minerals essential to the semiconductor supply chain and US national security," the *FT* quoted an official in the US Commerce Department's CHIPS office, which provides incentives for investment and equipment in the US, as saying.

The company has also brought in Cantor Fitzgerald, an investment banking and brokerage firm chaired by Brandon Lutnick, the son of US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick, to lead efforts to raise more than $1bn in fresh equity, the *FT* said.

USA Rare Earth has been developing a mine in Sierra Blanca, Texas and a neo magnet manufacturing facility in Stillwater, Oklahoma, which is expected to go commercial in the first half of 2026.

The company, which has a market capitalisation of $3.45bn, has emerged as one of the more large-scale US neo magnet manufacturers. *Reuters* could not immediately verify the report.—Reuters

Homes buried under ice as storm sweeps across US east coast

- State of emergency declared in multiple states as snowfall intensifies
- Govt offices in Washington closed; widespread school closures, delays across region

By Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: The snow could be heard before it was seen — falling with urgency, muffling the city, softening the hard edges of streets and rooftops.

A streetlamp blinked through the white, uncertain. A silhouette lingered at the corner — a snowman, perhaps, or a trick of shadow. Footprints appeared and vanished almost instantly, swallowed by fresh layers. The city seemed to exhale, and for a moment, nothing moved.

From the Mid-Atlantic to New England, states of emergency were declared as a powerful winter storm spread north and east, forcing the closure of government offices and schools, disrupting transportation and straining power supplies.

In Washington, federal government offices were ordered to remain closed on Monday following a weekend shutdown, with officials warning that closures could extend into Tuesday. Widespread school cancellations and delays were also expected across the region, many already announced by Sunday evening.

Mayor Muriel Bowser declared a state of emergency as snowfall intensified and temperatures plunged. Residents were advised to stay home except in emergencies, citing hazardous road conditions caused by sleet, ice accumulation, and sustained subfreezing temperatures.

Public schools issued special instructions urging parents to keep children off untreated roads and pavements, warning that even short walks had become dangerous.

Similar measures were announced further north. In New York, Governor Kathy Hochul cautioned that the storm could bring some of the heaviest snowfall of the season, particularly in upstate regions, with significant disruption expected in and around New York City.

Meteorologists said the storm was being driven by an Arctic air mass colliding with moisture-laden Atlantic systems — a volatile combination producing not only snow, but sleet and freezing rain. The mix has proven especially treacherous, turning highways into sheets of ice, increasing the risk of accidents.

Authorities reported hundreds of weather-related road incidents across several states. Officials repeatedly urged residents to avoid non-essential travel, warning that even emergency responders faced delays reaching those in need.

The storm has taken a heavy toll on infrastructure. More than 500,000 homes and businesses were without electricity by late Sunday after snow and ice brought down power lines and tree branches. Utility crews were deployed across affected regions, though companies warned restoration efforts could take days.

A MAN walks along the National Mall as snow falls in Washington.—AFP

Air and rail travel was severely disrupted. Thousands of flights were cancelled nationwide. Rail operators reported delays and suspensions on several routes, while key interstate highways were closed or restricted due to poor visibility.

Beyond the measurable damage lay quieter disruptions. Grocery store shelves emptied quickly as residents prepared for prolonged confinement.

Heating shelters were opened in multiple states to protect people experiencing homelessness from exposure. Health officials warned of heightened risks of frostbite and hypothermia, particularly among the elderly and children.

Meteorologists said the storm's impact would extend well beyond the snowfall itself.

National Guard units were placed on standby in several states to assist with emergency transport and recovery operations.

Printed at Pakistan Herald Publications (Pvt) Ltd by Khalil Mohsin and published for Pakistan Herald Publications (Pvt) Ltd by Shahjahan at Haroon House, Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed Road, Karachi. EDITOR: ZAFFAR ABBAS